

A Temporarily Resurrected Dog and Other Wonders: Thomas of Margā and Early Christian/Muslim Encounters

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Abstract

In the mid-ninth century, the east Syrian bishop Thomas of Margā composed a lengthy monastic history now known as *The Book Of Governors*. Amidst Thomas's numerous anecdotes concerning the exploits of Christian holy men, appear over a dozen stories involving Muslim characters. A critical examination of these tales focusing on issues of word choice, characterization, and narrative assumptions provides important data for the development of Christian depictions of Muslims, as well as for the early history of Christian/Muslim relations. Despite their value, modern scholarship has almost completely neglected Syriac monastic histories such as *The Book Of Governors*. A recognition of how useful these texts can be for medieval history forces us to rethink modern genre distinctions and argues against a sharp delineation between the often used categories of history and hagiography.

Keywords

Thomas of Margā, Book of Governors, Syriac, muslims, hagiography, Covenant of Umar, islam

“Then an Arab, crossing from the mountains to the city, came to this monastery along with many divisions (of men). (He was) an evil and cruel man. And he had with him a hunting dog that he brought along as a gift for one of the rulers over him. And after he had bound it in the outer martyrion, somehow it happened that that dog died. And when it was morning and he saw that his dog was dead, he became quite indignant and he began to threaten the monks... (And the monks) went to Rabban's cell and informed him of the matter. And (Rabban Cyriacus) took up his staff, came, entered, saw the Arab, and said to him, “Why are you so enraged and threatening us?” He said, “Because you killed the dog that I brought with great effort.” He said to him, “And if your dog is not dead, will you demand anything from us?” He said to him, “God forbid that I would at all trouble you.” And the blessed

old man asked about the dog and they showed it (to him) from a distance. And he said to that Arab, "Your dog is not dead. Rather, you and your companions rise and mount up and I will wake your dog and he will go with you." And after (the Arab) mounted up, (Rabban Cyriacus) went out and touched (the dog) with the tip of his staff saying, "Dead dog, get up and die outside our district." And immediately that dog got up. And all those Arabs saw and were amazed. And they threw a rope of bark on it and led it away. And when it reached Edra Balas, the dog died. And in this way those men departed having not harmed anything."¹

What do we do with a ninth-century Syriac dog story, especially the story of a dog who—at least at first—cannot stay dead? Perhaps, like the Arabs in this tale, it would be wisest simply to express amazement at the dog's resurrection then, upon the story's conclusion and the dog's eventual demise, just keep on going. But what would happen if instead we turned back? That is, what could we gain from a close reading of this anecdote and others like it? I suspect that such narratives have much to teach us, especially concerning Syriac Christian reactions to the rise of Islam.

In recent years scholars have become increasingly interested in early Syriac sources that speak of Muslims, and for good reason—Syriac works form the most extensive and diverse corpus of early Christian writings on Islam.² Nevertheless, modern scholarship remains quite selective in what sorts of texts it examines. For example, Syriac works most often categorized

¹ Thomas, *The Book of Governors*, 4.19 (E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of Governors: The Historia Monastica of Thomas Bishop of Marga A.D. 840, v. 1* (London, 1893), 228-229).

² Some of the most recent discussions concerning Syriac texts about Islam can be found in Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam*, William Chester Jordan, Michael Cook and Peter Schäfer, eds, *Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Emmanouela Grypeou, Mark N. Swanson and David Thomas, eds, *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, *The History of Christian-Muslim Relations*, vol. 5 (Leiden: Brill, 2006); H.L. Murre-Van den Berg, J.J. van Ginkel, T.M. van Lint, eds, *Redefining Christian Identity: Cultural Interaction in the Middle East since the Rise of Islam*, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta*, vol. 134 (Leuven: Peeters, 2005). For a bibliography of earlier studies see Michael Penn, "Syriac Sources for Early Christian/Muslim Relations," *Islamochristiana* 29 (2003), 59-78; Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*, *Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam*, vol. 13 (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1997).

as apocalypses, chronicles and disputations have received a fair amount of attention.³ In contrast, documents like the one describing this unfortunate

³ For Syriac apocalypses see, for example: Griffith, *In the Shadow of the Mosque*, 23-35; Gerrit J. Reinink, "Early Christian Reactions to the Building of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem," *Xristianskij Vostok* 2 (2002), 227-241; Cynthia Villagomez, "Christian Salvation through Muslim Domination: Divine Punishment and Syriac Apocalyptic Expectation in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries," *Medieval Encounters* 4 (1998), 203-218; Han J.W. Drijvers, "The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles: A Syriac Apocalypse from the Early Islamic Period," in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic East, v. 1*, Averil Cameron and Lawrence I. Conrad, eds, *Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press, 1991), 189-213; Harald Suermann, *Die geschichtstheologische Reaktion auf die einfallenden Muslime in der edessenischen Apokalypsik des 7. Jahrhunderts*, Europäische Hochschulschriften, vol. 256 (Frankfurt am Main: 1985) and the numerous studies on *The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* listed in Gerrit J. Reinink, *Die Syrische Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius*, CSCO vol. 541 (syri 221) (Leuven: Peeters, 1993), xlviii-lx. For Syriac chronicles, see, for example: Jan J. Van Ginkel, "The End is Near! Some Remarks on the Relationship between Historiography, Eschatology, and Apocalyptic Literature in the West-Syrian Tradition," in *Syriac Polemics: Studies in Honour of Gerrit Jan Reinink*, Wout Jac van Bakkum, Jan Willem Drijvers and Alex C. Klugkist, eds, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 205-217; Jan J. van Ginkel, "The Perception and Presentation of the Arab Conquest in Syriac Historiography: How did the Changing Social Position of the Syrian Orthodox Community Influence the Account of their Historiographers?" in *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, 171-184; Amir Harrak, "Ah! the Assyrian is the Rod of my Hand! Syriac View of History after the Advent of Islam," in *Redefining Christian Identity*, 35-44; Gerrit J. Reinink, "East Syrian Historiography in Response to the Rise of Islam: The Case of John bar Penkaye's *Ktābā d-res melle*," in *Redefining Christian Identity*, 77-90; Amir Harrak, *The Chronicle of Zuqnin, Parts III and IV*, *Mediaeval Sources in Translation*, vol. 36 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1999); Gerrit J. Reinink, "Pseudo-Methodius and the Pseudo-Ephremian 'Sermo de Fine Mundi'," in *Media Latinitas: A Collection of Essays to Mark the Retirement of L.J. Engels*, R.I.A. Nip, ed. (1996), 317-321; Andrew Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles*, *Translated Texts for Historians*, vol. 15 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993). For Syriac disputation texts see, for example: Griffith, *In the Shadow of the Mosque*, 35-39, 73-78; Harald Suermann, "The Old Testament and the Jews in the Dialogue between the Jacobite Patriarch John I and 'Umayr ibn Sa'd al-Ansari," in *Eastern Crossroads: Essays on Medieval Christian Legacy*, Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala, ed. (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2007), 131-141; Gerrit J. Reinink, "Political Power and Right Religion in the East Syrian Disputation between a Monk of Bet Hale and an Arab Notable," in *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, 153-170; Gerrit J. Reinink, "The Lamb on the Tree: Syriac Exegesis and Anti-Islamic Apologetics," in *The Sacrifice of Isaac: The Aqedah (Genesis 22) and its Interpretations*, Ed Noort and Eibert Tigchelaar, eds (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 109-124; Sidney H. Griffith, "Disputing with Islam in Syriac: The Case of the Monk of Bēt Halē and a Muslim Emir," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 3,

canine are mainly labeled as monastic histories and often have been overlooked.⁴ As a result, many of the most useful witnesses to medieval Christian views of Islam remain unanalyzed, uncited, and in many cases, unknown.

This is due, in part, to modern genre categories. Unlike chronicles, which scholars often view as relatively accurate accounts, or apocalypses, which scholars frequently treat as fanciful imagination: monastic histories present a disturbing *mélange* of well-attested figures interspersed with more historically suspect characters, such as a temporarily resurrected dog. It is, however, these documents' very polyvalence that makes them such useful sources for analysis. As a means to illustrate the import of these often neglected works, I will focus on just one of the dozens of extant medieval Syriac monastic histories, a ninth-century account of the east Syrian monastery Beth Abhe. I plan to further limit my analysis to just one of the hundreds of topics this particular monastic history addresses, Christian reactions to Islam. The resulting case example exemplifies how rich is the data found in this sort of text. The contrast between the value of these works and how infrequently they are discussed by modern scholars challenges the way we categorize and prioritize medieval literature.

no. 1 (2000); Gerrit J. Reinink, "The Beginnings of Syriac Apologetic Literature in Response to Islam," *Oriens Christianus* 77 (1993), 165-187; Sidney H. Griffith, "Disputes with Muslims in Syriac Christian Texts: from Patriarch John (d. 648) to Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286)," in *Religionsgespräche im Mittelalter*, eds. Bernard Lewis and Friedrich Niewöhner, Wolfenbütteler Mittelalter-Studien (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992), 251-273; Sidney H. Griffith, "The Apologetic Treatise of Nonnus of Nisibis," *ARAM* 3 (1991), 115-138; Sidney H. Griffith, "Free Will in Christian Kalam: Moshe Bar Kepha Against the Teachings of the Muslims," *Le Muséon* 100 (1987), 143-159; Sidney H. Griffith, "Theodore Bar Kōnī's Scholion: A Nestorian Summa Contra Gentiles from the First Abbasid Century," in *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period*, Nina G. Garsoïan, Thomas F. Mathews and Robert W. Thomson, eds (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982), 53-72; Sidney H. Griffith, "Chapter Ten of the Scholion: Theodore Bar Kōnī's Apology for Christianity," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 47 (1981), 158-188.

⁴ Rare exceptions can be found in Andrew Palmer, "Amid in the Seventh-Century Syriac Life of Theodute," in *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam*, 111-138; Andrew Palmer, *Monk and Mason on the Tigris Frontier: The Early History of Tur 'Abdin*, Cambridge Oriental Publications, vol. 39 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Gerrit J. Reinink, "Die Muslime in einer Sammlung von Dämonengeschichten des Klosters von Qennesrin", in *VI Symposium Syriacum 1992*, René Lavenant, ed., *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1994), 335-346.

In 1893 the orientalist Wallis Budge published an edition and translation of a 184-folio Syriac document originally titled *kṯābā dʿrīshānē*.⁵ Budge called this work *The Book of Governors* and despite a number of competing and arguably more accurate translations, Budge's title has prevailed.⁶ Over a century later, Budge's edition, translation and introduction of *The Book of Governors* remains the only full-length work concerning this collection of anecdotes about Beth Abhe.⁷ Located about fifty miles northeast of Mosul, Beth Abhe became renowned for training future leaders of the Church of the East, including Thomas, the author of *The Book of Governors*.⁸ Thomas originally was a monk at Beth Abhe, later the secretary to the East Syrian Catholicos Mar Abraham and, when he wrote *The Book of Governors*, Thomas served as the Bishop of Margā.⁹

At the beginning of *The Book of Governors*, Thomas explains that he recorded the history of Beth Abhe from ca. 595 CE until the 840s "to set down in writing stories concerning the holy men lest, unwritten, (their) histories be passed over and forgotten."¹⁰ Throughout *The Book of Governors*, Thomas often returns to the theme of preserving the memory of

⁵ Budge, *The Book of Governors*, v. 1. Budge based his edition on *BL. Or. 2316* and notes variations found in *Vat. syr. 165* and two private manuscripts in his possession. Although Budge's edition remains the most cited, several years later Paul Bedjan produced another edition of *The Book of Governors* based on *Sachau 179* (Paul Bedjan, *Liber superiorum seu historia monastica auctore Thoma, episcopo margensi* (Paris: Harrassowitz, 1901)).

⁶ For example, Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 44, 70, 163 translated as "Book of the Abbots."

⁷ For more detailed discussions of Beth Abhe see Adam H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 169-170, 179; Chase F. Robinson, *Empire and Elites after the Muslim Conquest: The Transformation of Northern Mesopotamia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 90-102; Cynthia Villagomez, "The Fields, Flocks, and Finances of Monks: Economic Life at Nestorian Monasteries, 500-850" (Ph.D. diss, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA, 1998); William G. Young, *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph: a Study of the Relationships of the Church of the East with the Sassanid Empire and the Early Caliphates up to 820 AD* (Rawalpindi: Christian Study Center, 1974), 106-127.

⁸ Villagomez, "Fields, Flocks, and Finances", 9.

⁹ Modern scholars often claim that Thomas was the brother of the Catholicos Theodosius I and that Thomas later became the Metropolitan of Bēt Garmāy. J. M. Fiey, "Thomas of Marga: notule de littérature Syriacque", *Le Muséon* 78 (1965), 362-364, however, has convincingly shown that this attribution is erroneous.

¹⁰ Thomas, *The Book of Governors*, 1.1 (Budge, *The Book of Governors*, 1:15).

famous ascetics and their miraculous deeds in order to provide models of virtue.¹¹ Thomas's emphasis on the edification that comes from sharing stories about saints corresponds with motifs found throughout late antique and early medieval hagiography.¹² For the critical reader, it also raises concerns about the factual accuracy of Thomas's accounts. Thomas directly addresses this issue emphasizing that he has received his information from reputable sources:

Then may the reader comprehend and may the listener understand that the things concerning the holy ones which our tract relates are not our invention. For I gathered the material from that which was spoken concerning (the holy ones) by living words and from the writings that I found concerning them in the histories and the traditions of others.¹³

Thomas also repeatedly states his desire for chronological accuracy, often asking his audience to forgive minor inconsistencies occasioned by conflicting source material.¹⁴ Here Thomas draws from the standard *topoi* of medieval chronicles. For example, the Syriac *Chronicle of Zuqnin*, written about forty years before *The Book of Governors*, states:

Even the earlier writers do not agree with each other. . . . If (an event) is one year earlier or one or two later this does not harm the discerning and those who fear God.¹⁵

Thus, like many Syriac monastic histories, *The Book of Governors* combines literary elements that scholars often characterize as hagiographic with those they often characterize as historical.

The Book of Governors' refusal to fit tidily into modern genre categories has resulted in two general approaches to Thomas's work. Its stories of a

¹¹ For example, Thomas, *The Book of Governors*, 2.17, 2.39, 4.13 (Budge, *The Book of Governors*, 1:90, 1:123, 1:215).

¹² Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Martyr Passions and Hagiography," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter, eds (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2008), 603-628.

¹³ Thomas, *The Book of Governors*, 1.2 (Budge, *The Book of Governors*, 1:19).

¹⁴ For example, Thomas, *The Book of Governors*, 2.19, 2.21 (Budge, *The Book of Governors*, 1:92, 1:94). Thomas also reassures his reader's of the veracity of his accounts in *Ibid.*, 1.23, 2.30 (*Ibid.*, 1:47, 105). He also frequently refers to his dependence on the written and oral accounts of others as in *Ibid.*, 1.18, 2.13, 2.16, 4.2, 6.8 (*Ibid.*, 1:41, 1:85, 1:88, 1:193, 1:293, 1:360).

¹⁵ *The Chronicle of Zuqnin*, Preface to Book Four (CSCO 104: 147).

resurrected dog, teleporting trees, miraculously tamed lions, and a petrified dragon have caused many scholars to view *The Book of Governors* as unsuitable for historical inquiry.¹⁶ As a consequence, investigations of medieval Christian responses to Islam almost never reference Thomas's passages on this topic.¹⁷ Other scholars, implicitly trusting Thomas's apologies, present brief summaries of Thomas's stories as historically unproblematic data. For Budge this included such facts as angelic revelations to abbots, divinely commissioned earthquakes swallowing whole villages, and fire springing from an ascetic's fingertips.¹⁸ Recent scholarship has become more selective as to what passages are cited, but the overarching dynamic of simply recounting Thomas's narratives often prevails.¹⁹ Neither a quick dismissal nor an uncritical acceptance of Thomas's anecdotes does justice to the complexity of Thomas's text or to the context in which it was written. I want to suggest a more middle of the road approach to *The Book of Governors*, an approach which argues that Thomas's work remains an important source for understanding the early Church of the East but a source that scholars cannot simply paraphrase.

In terms of early Christian reactions to the rise of Islam, Thomas's focus on the miraculous deeds of Christian holy men causes Muslims to play a minor role in *The Book of Governors* and they appear in only a dozen or so of the hundreds of anecdotes that Thomas shares. Nevertheless, an analysis of word choice, characterization and narrative assumptions in these stories illustrates the value of examining works like *The Book of Governors* from an increasingly critical but nondismissive angle. Such an investigation elucidates Thomas's own views of Muslims, helps reconstruct medieval Christian/Muslim interactions and ultimately challenges the utility of genre distinctions such as history versus hagiography often employed by modern scholars.

¹⁶ Thomas, *The Book of Governors*, 4.19, 4.19, 2.32, 6.15 (Budge, *The Book of Governors*, 1:228-229, 229-230, 111, 383).

¹⁷ For the few exceptions to this tendency, see Robinson, *Empire and Elites*, 90-102; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 213-215; Michael G. Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 301-302; Young, *Patriarch, Shaw, and Caliph*, 106-127.

¹⁸ Budge, *The Book of Governors*, 1: cx, cxvii.

¹⁹ Robinson, *Empire and Elites*, 90-102, provides a clear exception.

Word Choice

Three words into Thomas's dead dog story, the modern reader is already left in a quandary. Who exactly is the anecdote's antagonist? Thomas refers to the dog owner using the Syriac word *ṭayyāyā*. Modern scholars almost always translate *ṭayyāyā* as "Arab." But for Thomas the word *ṭayyāyā* is much more complicated than the English translation "Arab" suggests. An investigation of Thomas's use of this key term not only helps us to better understand this particular story, it also provides valuable hints regarding Thomas's attitude toward Muslims.

As will soon become apparent, what Thomas means by *ṭayyāyā* is much closer to the English term "Muslim" than to "Arab." But why did Thomas not simply call the canine's master a Muslim? In order to answer this question we must first delineate Thomas's options by comparing his word choice with that of other medieval Syriac authors. Although it was not until centuries after Thomas's death that writers commonly used the Syriac term *mashl'mānā* (Muslim),²⁰ by the time Thomas wrote *The Book of Governors*, Syriac Christians had already developed an extensive vocabulary regarding individuals whom we would call Muslims. One of the most surprising aspects of Thomas's writing is how few of these terms he employs in the course of almost 200 folios.

Thomas could have used the Syriac word *mahag'rāyā*, most often translated Hagarene, as did numerous Syriac chronicles, letters, disputations, vitae, canon lists and colophons.²¹ From its earliest use the term

²⁰ For example, *The Chronicle of Zuqnin*, Book Four (CSCO 104: 195, 387) and the twelfth-century Dionysius Bar Ṣalībī, *A Response to the Arabs*, 1, 24, 28 (CSCO 614: 4, 104, 123). Even these sources, however, more often use other terms to speak of Muslims, especially *ṭayyāyā*.

²¹ Isho'yahd III, *Letter 48B* (CSCO 11: 97); The colophon of *BL Add. 14,666* (dated 682) (*BL Add. 14,666*, f. 56); Jacob of Edessa, *Questions of Addai* (Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 604-695); Jacob of Edessa, *Letter II to John Stylites* (CSCO 367: 237); *The Life of Theodūtē* (excerpts translated in Palmer, "Amid in the Seventh Century", 111-138); *The Kamed el-Loz Inscriptions* (dated 714-715) (P. Mouterde, "Inscriptions en syriaque dialectal a Kamed [Beq'a]", *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 22 (1939), 83, 96); *John and the Emir* (Michael Philip Penn, "John and the Emir: A New Introduction, Edition and Translation", *Le Muséon* 121 (2008), 100, 102); *The Chronicle ad 724* (CSCO 3: 155); *Chronicle of Zuqnin* (CSCO 104: 341); *The Chronicle ad 775* (CSCO 5: 348); *The Qenneshre Fragment* (François Nau, "Notice historique sur le monastère de Qaramin, suivie d'une note sur le monastère de Qennesré", in *Actes du XIVe congrès international des orientalistes, Alger 1905, Part 2* (Paris, 1907), 131); Scribal addition to *The Letter of Athanasius of Balad* (François Nau, "Littérature canonique syriaque inédite", *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien*

mahag^crāyā signifies a non-Christian, but its preservation of the name Hagar also emphasizes a genealogy. Alluding to Genesis 21, it connects the recipient to the line of Hagar and her son Ishmael, implying that the mahag^crāyā is someone whom we would call an Arab Muslim. Many Syriac writers make this link even more explicit by using the term “sons of Hagar” to speak of Muslims.²² Other writers employ sarqānā, a Syriac adoption of the Greek Saracen which ancient etymologies also connect with Hagar.²³ Thus, each of these terms has a derogatory edge as both Genesis 21 and its later interpretation in Galatians 4:21-31 emphasize Hagar’s lineage as one of slavery and inferior to the lineage of God’s chosen people, the line of Isaac.²⁴ This combination of religious, ethnic, and

14 (1909), 128); St Mark Colophon (dated 806) (cited in Sebastian Brock, “The Use of *Hijra* Dating in Syriac Manuscripts: A Preliminary Investigation”, in *Redefining Christian Identity*, 283); Moshe bar Kepha, “On Free Will” (*BL Add.* 14,731, f. 11a); *The Canons of Giwargi* (CSCO 375: 4).

²² Sons of Hagar, e.g., *The Pseudo-Ephrem Apocalypse* (CSCO 320: 61); The colophon of *BL Add.* 14,666 (dated 682) (*BL Add.* 14,666, f. 56); John bar Penkaye, *Book of Main Points* (Alphonse Mingana, *Sources syriaques I* (Leipzig: Dominican Press, 1907), 141*, 144*, 145*); *The Edessene Apocalypse* (Francisco Javier Martinez, “Eastern Christian Apocalyptic in the Early Muslim Period: Pseudo-Methodius and Pseudo-Athanasius” (Ph.D. Diss., The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, 1985), 222-223.); *The Disputation at Bêt Ḥalē* (unpublished); The colophon of *Pierpont Morgan* 236 (dated 760) (cited in Brock, “*Hijra* Dating”, 283); *The Chronicle of Zuqnin* (CSCO 104: 154); *The Life of Gabriel of Qartmin* (Palmer, *Monk and Mason*, lxxii); *The Bahira Legend* (Richard Gottheil, “A Christian Bahira Legend”, *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 13 (1898), 202-203, 207, 237).

²³ *The Maronite Chronicle* (CSCO 3:72); *The Kamed el-Loz Inscriptions* (dated 714-715) (Mouterde, “Inscriptions en syriaque”, 82); *The Chronicle of Disasters* (François Nau, “Un colloque du patriarche Jean avec l’émir des Agaréens et faits divers des années 712 à 716,” *Journal Asiatique* 11 (1915), 256); *The Bahira Legend* (Gottheil, “A Christian Bahira Legend” (1898): 202, 216). For examples of the connection between the term Saracen and Hagar see John of Damascus, *De Haeresibus* 100 (SC 383: 110) and Isidore, *Etymologies* 9: 2 (W.M. Lindsay, *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum Sive Originum: Libros I-X Continens*, Scriptorum Classicorum Bibliotheca Oxoniensis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911)).

²⁴ Griffith, *In the Shadow of the Mosque*, 24, n. 6; Sidney H. Griffith, *Syriac Writers on Muslims and the Religious Challenge of Islam* (Kerala: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1995), 10-11; Griffith, “Moshe Bar Kepha Against the Teachings of the Muslims”, 151-154; Sidney H. Griffith, “The Prophet Muhammad His Scripture and His Message according to the Christian Apologies in Arabic and Syriac from the First Abbasid Century,” in *La vie du prophète Mahomet*, T. Fahd, ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1980): 122.

polemic connotations makes Hagarenes, sons of Hagar, and Saracens among the most common Syriac terms for Muslims. Thomas, however, never uses these terms.

Syriac authors also call Muslims *ḥanpē*, a term otherwise used for pagans.²⁵ At one point Nonnus of Nisibis even calls Muslims the “new pagans” (*ḥadtē ḥanpē*).²⁶ Labeling Muslims as pagans distinguishes them from Christians, maligns them, and, as pointed out by Sidney Griffith, is a bilingual pun because the Syriac *ḥanpē* sounds like one of the Qur’an’s terms for a follower of Islam, *ḥanif*.²⁷ The East Syrian Catholicos Timothy I also recycles centuries’ worth of polemic when he refers to Muslims as the “new Jews.”²⁸ But when speaking of Muslims, Thomas avoids these overtly deprecating terms.

Some Syriac writers call Muslims “Ishmaelites” or “sons of Ishmael.” These terms emphasize a genealogy but, for these writers, they also denote a non-Christian.²⁹ Here we finally find terms that Thomas does use. Thomas, however, employs them differently than most of his compatriots.

²⁵ Theodore bar Koni, *Scholion* 10 (CSCO 69: 232); Scribal incipit to *Letter from Athanasius of Balad* (Nau, “Littérature canonique syriaque inédite”, 128); Nonnus of Nisibis, *Apologetic Treatise* (Albert Van Roey, *Nonnus de Nisibe: traité apologetique*, Bibliothèque de Muséon, vol. 21 (Louvain: 1948), 17*, 33*).

²⁶ Nonnus of Nisibis, *Apologetic Treatise* (Roey, *Nonnus de Nisibe: traité apologetique*, 12*).

²⁷ Griffith, *Syriac Writers on Muslims and the Religious Challenge of Islam*, 9; Griffith, “The Apologetic Treatise of Nonnus of Nisibis”, 127; Griffith, “The Prophet Muhammad”, 9.

²⁸ Timothy I, *Letter 40* (Thomas R. Hurst, “Letter 40 of the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I (727-823): An Edition and Translation” (MA Thesis, The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, 1981), 11). For a more detailed discussion of the overlap between anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim polemic among early Syriac and Christian-Arabic writings see Sidney H. Griffith, “Jews and Muslims in Christian Syriac and Arabic Texts of the Ninth Century,” *Jewish History* 3 (1988), 65-94.

²⁹ Ishmaelites: *The Kurzistan Chronicle* (CSCO 1: 32, 39); The colophon of *BL Add.* 14,448 (dated 699 CE) (*BL Add.* 14,448, f. 209b); the preface to *Manchester Ryl.* 4 (dated 753) (cited in Brock, “*Hijra* Dating”, 283); The colophon of *Sinai syr.* 38 (dated 760) (cited in Brock, “*Hijra* Dating”, 283); The colophon of *BL Add.* 17,170 (dated 774-775) (*BL Add.* 17,170, f. 88a); The colophon of *Vat. Syr.* 1 (dated 929) (cited in Brock, “*Hijra* Dating”, 284). Sons of Ishmael: *The Chronicle of Kurzistan* (CSCO 1: 30, 38); The colophon of *BL Add.* 14,666 (dated 682) (*BL Add.* 14,666, f. 56); John bar Penkaye, *Book of Main Points* 15 (Mingana, *Sources Syriaques I*, 167*); *The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* (CSCO 540: 24, 25, 35); *The Edessene Apocalypse* (Martinez, “Eastern Christian Apocalyptic”, 222, 223, 225); *The Chronicle of Disasters* (Nau, “Un colloque du patriarche Jean”, 253); *The Disputation at Bêt Halē* (unpublished); *The Bahira Legend* (Gottheil, “A Christian Bahira Legend” (1898), 202-203, 205, 207, 210, 229, 232-234, 236-237).

The Book of Governors describes four figures as Ishmaelites or sons of Ishmael. Two of these characters, Amran son of Muhammad and an unnamed man whose son is healed by Bishop Cyriacus, are Muslim.³⁰ But Thomas also applies this term to two Christian abbots, Elijah and Shubhhal-Isho, where it conveys specific stereotypes.³¹ For example, when speaking of the Ishmaelite Abbot Elijah, Thomas explains that Elijah was prone to rash decisions “since by nature, natural fervor and disorderly zeal clings to the Ishmaelite race (Syriac *gensā* from Greek *genos*).”³² This temperamental nature later causes Elijah unjustly to expel the virtuous Mar Jacob from his monastery. The Ishmaelite Amran son of Muhammad is even quicker to anger. In one account, the Christian holy man Mar Gabriel mollifies Amran’s “harsh nature,” in another Amran attempts to murder Bishop Mar Cyriacus.³³ Thus, for Thomas Ishmaelite and sons of Ishmael are more closely aligned with what we would label ethnicity or race than with religion;³⁴ in *The Book of Governors*, there are Ishmaelite Muslims and Ishmaelite Christians.³⁵

³⁰ Thomas, *The Book of Governors*, 4.21, 6.16; 4.18 (Budge, *The Book of Governors*, 1: 239, 387; 222).

³¹ *Ibid.* 1.9, 5.2 (*Ibid.*, 1: 29, 253).

³² *Ibid.* 1.9 (*Ibid.*, 1: 33).

³³ *Ibid.* 6.16, 4.22 (*Ibid.*, 1: 386, 243).

³⁴ Terms such as “ethnicity,” “race” and “religion” are, of course, modern constructs. The distinction that I suggest between an ethnic term and a religious one is based more on modern usage that often tries to separate these categories from each other than ancient usage that often strongly correlates them with each other. Especially provocative in its examination of late-ancient perspectives on these issues is Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2005), esp. 40–49, where Buell discusses religion as a “swing category” in ancient ethnic reasoning.

³⁵ Thomas thrice uses another term often translated as “Arab”: ‘*urābā*. In two of these cases it is unclear if the ‘*urābā* is Muslim. In 5.16 (Budge, *The Book of Governors*, 1: 316), due to economic necessity, an ‘*urābā* is about to become a thief but is saved from a life of crime when Mar Narsai gives him five hundred zuze. In 6.6 (*Ibid.*, 1: 353) Thomas emphasizes the range of people who visit Rabban Cyprian including ‘*urābē*, Ninevites, people from Abiabene, people from Beth Garmai, etc. Although in both cases ‘*urābā* may refer to someone whom we would call a Muslim, the stories do not require this. In contrast, in 2.41 Thomas’s use of ‘*urābā* implies a religious affiliation. Here an unnamed bishop is attempting to keep his identity secret by speaking Arabic. Marran-Zekna is not deceived, however, because he had earlier seen the clandestine bishop praying to the east and reciting a Christian hymn. Maran-Zekna indicates that the bishop’s cover has been blown when he states, “From whom did you learn the hymn of our Lord’s resurrection if you are an Arab (‘*urābā*) as you say? And why do you stretch your arms and your gaze

If Thomas does not use Ishmaelite or sons of Ishamel as a religious category and he never uses hagarenes, sons of Hagar, Saracens, pagans, or new Jews to refer to Muslims, what does he call them? As in the dog story, whenever Thomas speaks of characters whom we would call Muslims, he uses *ṭayyāyā* or its plural *ṭayyāyē*. Thomas is far from the first writer to speak of *ṭayyāyē*. Although originally it referred to a specific tribe, pre-conquest Syriac authors most often used *ṭayyāyē* to more broadly designate the indigenous people of Arabia. Originally the term could be applied to both non-Christians and Christians.³⁶ After the Islamic conquests, however, the term *ṭayyāyē* became a popular designation for Muslims.³⁷ The

Eastward?" (Budge, *The Book of Governors*, 1: 131). Nevertheless, because three instances make such a small sample, I err on the side of caution and have not included these *urābē* in my analysis of Thomas's view of Muslims.

³⁶ Griffith, *Syriac Writers on Muslims and the Religious Challenge of Islam*, 8. For the most detailed study of pre-conquest use of the term *ṭayyāyā*, see J.B. Segal, "Arabs in Syriac Literature before the Rise of Islam," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 4 (1984), 89-123.

³⁷ For example, *The Record of the Arabic Conquest* (CSCO 3: 76); *The Chronicle Around 640* (CSCO 3: 147-148); Isho'yahd III, *Letters* 48B, 14C (CSCO 11: 97, 251); *The Chronicle of Khurzistan* (CSCO 1: 30, 31, 35-38); *The Maronite Chronicle* (CSCO 3: 70-74); George I, *Letter* (J.B. Chabot, *Synodicon orientale ou recueil de synodes nestoriens* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902): 227); *The Canons of George I* (Chabot, *Synodicon orientale*, 216); John bar Penkaye, *Book of Main Points* 15 (Mingana, *Sources Syriacques I*, 142*, 158*, 160*); Jacob of Edessa, *Chronicle* (CSCO 5: 326); The colophon of *BL Add. 14,448* (dated 699 CE) (*BL Add. 14,448*, f. 209b); *The Anti-Life of Maximus the Confessor* (Sebastian Brock, "An Early Syriac Life of Maximus the Confessor", *Analecta Bollandiana* 91 (1973), 310-312); *The Chronicle ad 705* (J.P.N. Land, *Anecdota Syriaca* (Leiden: 1862), 11); *The Kamed el-Loz Inscriptions* (dated 714-715) (Mouterde, "Inscriptions en syriaque", 92, 93); *The Disputation at Bēt Halē* (unpublished); *Ebnesh Inscription* (Andrew Palmer, "The Messiah and the Mahdi: History Presented as the Writing on the Wall," in *Polyphonia Byzantina: Studies in Honour of Willem J. Aerts*, Hero Hokwerda, Edmé R. Smits and Marinus M. Woesthuis, eds (Groningen: 1993), 61); *The Life of Theodōrē*, 58, 61, 93 (unpublished); The colophon of *BL Or. 8732* (dated 770) (*BL Or. 8732*, f. 56a); *The Chronicle of Zuqnin* (CSCO 104: 148-339); *The Life of John of Daylam* (Sebastian Brock, "A Syriac Life of John of Dailam", *Parole de l'Orient* 10 (1981-1982), 136); *Chronicle ad 813* (CSCO 5: 213, 217); *The Chronicle ad 819* (CSCO 81: 10-13); The colophon of *BL Add. 14,623* (dated 823) (*BL Add. 14,623*, f. 88b); The death notice in *BL Add. 14,604* (dated 837) (*BL Add. 14,604*, f. 116b); *The Chronicle ad 846* (CSCO 3: 572, 573, 577); The death notice in *BL Add. 14,663* (dated third century AH) (*BL Add. 14,663*, f. 23a); Colophon of *BL Add. 17,109* (dated 873-874) (*BL Add. 17,109*, 147a); The ownership notice in *BL Add. 14,576* (dated 886-887) (*BL Add. 14,576*, 84b); The colophon of *Paris syr. 342* (dated 894); *The Bahira Legend* (Gottheil, "A Christian Bahira Legend" (1898), 202, 206, 229).

term frequently continued to carry ethnic overtones. For example, although they both follow Islam, *The Chronicle of Zuqnin* most often calls Ummayyad period Muslims Arabs (*ṭayyāyē*) but Abbasid period Muslims Persians (*parsāyē*).³⁸ For some writers *ṭayyāyā*'s ethnic connotation trumps its religious connotation. For example, two manuscripts most likely from the eighth century speak of a *ṭayyāyā* priest named Abraham and Sergius the abbot of the monastery of the *ṭayyāyē*.³⁹ Dionysius of Tel Maḥre, a contemporary of Thomas's, speaks of *ṭayyāyē* who were Christian and fought on behalf of the Byzantines, a usage preserved in the late twelfth-century *Chronicle of Michael the Syrian* and *The Chronicle of 1234*.⁴⁰ This ambiguity of the term *ṭayyāyā* forces the seventh-century Catholicos Isho'yahb III to speak of hagarene *ṭayyāyē* apparently to differentiate them from Christian Arabs.⁴¹ What about Thomas? Thomas uses the term Ishmaelite to designate what we might define as ethnicity. That is, for Thomas Ishmaelite is analogous to Syriac terms such as Egyptian or Armenian. Thomas uses the term we most often translate as Arab, however, exclusively to speak of religion. He employs *ṭayyāyē* just as he might "Jews" or "pagans." For Thomas there can be Ishmaelite Christians and Ishmaelite Arabs, but all Arabs are Muslim; in *The Book of Governors* a Christian *ṭayyāyā* would be oxymoronic.

Two types of evidence support this surprising result. First, each of the eleven characters whom Thomas calls a *ṭayyāyā* appears in a context suggesting that he or she is a Muslim.⁴² A fairly obvious example is the

³⁸ Harrak, *The Chronicle of Zuqnin, Parts III and IV*, 178, n. 1.

³⁹ *BL Add.* 17,217, f. 59; *BL Add.* 12,155, f. 125b. According to the paleographic judgment of W. Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum Acquired Since the Year 1838, volume 3* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1872), 1195 and W. Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum Acquired Since the Year 1838, volume 2* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1871), 955, both manuscripts were written in the eighth century.

⁴⁰ *The Chronicle of Michael the Syrian* 11:3 (J.B. Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*, 4: 410); *The Chronicle of 1234* (CSCO 81: 240).

⁴¹ Isho'yahd III, *Letter 48B* (CSCO 11: 97). Scholars such as E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of Governors: The Historia Monastica of Thomas Bishop of Marga A.D. 840, v. 2* (London: 1893), 51 and Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 148, 159 n. 156 have also noted the frequent ambiguity of a *ṭayyāyā*'s religious affiliation as several post-conquest writers continue to apply the term to both Christians and Muslims.

⁴² Thomas, *The Book of Governors*, 2.41, 3.3,3.4, 4.18–19, 4.19, 4.21–22, 4.24, 5.11, 5.11, 5.16 (Budge, *The Book of Governors*, 1: 130–133, 152–153, 153–155, 222–225, 228–229, 239–244, 246–248, 281, 287–289, 314–315). In 2.40 and 3.9 Thomas also uses

Ishamelite Arab named Amran bar Muhammad.⁴³ Alternatively, consider the Arabs in book 2, chapter 41. When an unnamed Egyptian bishop enters the desert with his Christian congregation, Arab raiders arrive. His congregation flees but the bishop remains because he knows that God will protect him. The Arabs kidnap the bishop but, after becoming acquainted with his honesty, they treat him as a brother and put him in charge of herding their camels. The bishop praises God for preserving his purity because being a camel herder keeps him far from polluting contact with the Arabs.⁴⁴ Although at first one could imagine Christian Arabs kidnapping a non-Arab bishop, each additional detail makes this scenario increasingly implausible. Similarly, in stories such as the Arab dog owner who threatens monks, an Arab bandit who assassinates abbots, or plundering Arabs who seize monastic property, the plot makes much more sense, and often demands, that the Arab characters be Muslim.⁴⁵

Even more to the point, Thomas's anecdotes often necessitate that, by definition, *ṭayyāyē* cannot be Christians. For example, Thomas relates the story of the priest Cyprian who encounters an Arab fishing in the Tigris. Cyprian is surprised to hear the Arab making a brief prayer in the name of the Christian ascetic Mar Narsai prior to casting his net. Cyprian asks the fisherman, "How when you are an Arab man (*gabrā ṭayyāyā*) do you cry out to the holy Narsai, the teacher of the Christians?"⁴⁶ Cyprian's question presupposes that an Arab could not himself be Christian. In another story, after Mar Cyriacus arrives in town, Thomas states that both the Christians and the *ṭayyāyē* follow him to be blessed by the holy man.⁴⁷ Thomas clearly envisions two separate and mutually exclusive groups. Even more telling is the passage where Thomas discusses Timothy I's mission to "barbarian nations." In this context Thomas claims that pagans are

ṭayyāyē for Hijra dating (*Ibid.* 1: 125, 167-168). The only two cases where Thomas uses *ṭayyāyē* to refer to non-Muslims occur in 1.9 and 2.16 where Thomas refers to Hathra as the "city of the Arabs" (*Ibid.* 1:28, 88). The first of these references occurs in an anecdote set just before the Islamic conquests and the second soon after the conquests so it is unlikely that Thomas is suggesting that Hathra is a Muslim-dominated city. Rather, he most likely employs a well-known epithet for Hathra even if it differs from his own use of *ṭayyāyē*.

⁴³ Thomas, *The Book of Governors*, 4.21-4.22, 6.16 (Budge, *The Book of Governors*, 1: 239-244, 386-388).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 2.41 (*Ibid.*, 1: 130-133).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 4.19, 5.16, 3.4 (*Ibid.*, 1: 228-229, 314-315, 152-153).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 5.16 (*Ibid.*, 1: 315).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 4.24 (*Ibid.*, 1: 246-248).

even worse than Jews and Arabs because, although not Christian, Jews and *ṭayyāyē* at least “confess in one God, the creator of heaven and earth.”⁴⁸ Here Thomas makes explicit the categories implicit in his other stories. In *The Book of Governors* there are three types of monotheists: Christians, Jews, and *ṭayyāyē*.

Discovering that Thomas employs the Syriac term *ṭayyāyā* to signify a Muslim leads to several important conclusions. First, it allows us to identify those passages where Thomas speaks of Muslims. Second, it helps us realize that, at least for *The Book of Governors*, the common translation of *ṭayyāyā* as “Arab” may be misleading. In contrast to the English word Arab, for Thomas this term does not designate what we most often classify as ethnicity but religion. Third, Thomas’s use of *ṭayyāyā* is an important data point documenting the gradual shift from this term’s preconquest connotation of nonsedentary tribes in Arabia to a later usage that shows increasing attention to religious difference. Finally, Thomas’s avoidance of other prevalent and more derogatory terms for Muslims and his exclusive employment of the less polemical *ṭayyāyā*, reflects a conscious choice on his part. It signals that Thomas’s opinion of Muslims is not uniformly hostile, a conclusion further substantiated by an examination of what Thomas says about these Arabs.

Characterization

In his narrative of the resurrected canine, Thomas wastes no time in characterizing the *ṭayyāyā*. By the second sentence we learn that the dog owner is evil (*bishā*) and cruel (*marīnā*). This character’s overreaction to his dog’s first death and his threats against Beth Abhe’s monks certainly support this portrayal. Thomas’s other tales often contain similar depictions of Muslims whom Thomas calls, “troublesome”, “wicked”, “insolent” and “plundering.”⁴⁹ At the same time, upon his dog’s second demise, the unnamed Muslim does not return to the monastery in anger. Rather, he respects his initial promise to Cyriacus to no longer trouble the monks. So too, some of Thomas’s other anecdotes contain more sympathetic descriptions of Muslims. This literary trope of Muslims as frequent threats

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 5.11 (*Ibid.*, 1: 281).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 4.21, 5.16, 3.4, 3.4 (*Ibid.*, 1: 239, 314, 153, 153).

and occasional allies becomes particularly apparent in Thomas's two story cycles concerning Amran son of Muhammad.

Budge's edition of *The Book of Governors* divides the work into six books. Originally, however, *The Book of Governors* consisted of only five books. What is now titled "Book Six of *The Book of Governors*" initially was a prior, independent work by Thomas; years after Thomas composed *The Book of Governors* a later scribe renamed an earlier text written by Thomas "Book Six of *The Book of Governors*" and the scribe placed it after the original five books.⁵⁰ This composition history helps us evaluate Thomas's characterization of Muslims because his longest discussion of a single Muslim character occurs in a series of anecdotes found twice in Budge's edition. He first wrote the stories about Amran son of Muhammad in the independent work that now appears as Book 6 which differ greatly from his later version preserved in what is now Book 4.

In his earlier work Thomas began his description of Amran by asking, "Then who is unacquainted with Amran son of Muhammad, this very cruel servant who was mollified and was turned from his violence by the intervention of this holy ruler (Mar Gabriel)?"⁵¹ The reforming of Amran begins when God reveals to Mar Gabriel the future of Amran and his descendants. Equipped with this divine foreknowledge, Gabriel instructs a monk to go to the village of Yazdainabhadh, find an Arab man named Amran, give him ten oxen, and ask Amran to visit Beth Abhe once he receives his inheritance. After events transpired as Gabriel predicted, Amran "was amazed and astonished and with his soul's sense he knew and perceived that the Christians' judgment was great and exalted before God,

⁵⁰ Budge based his edition of *The Book of Governors* on four closely related manuscripts, the oldest of which was written in the seventeenth century. Each of these manuscripts divides *The Book of Governors* into six books. Nevertheless, several pieces of data support Book 6 having originally been an earlier work of Thomas's. Book 5 draws the narrative of Beth Abhe to a close stating "here ends the history of the holy men who lived in the Monastery of Beth Abhe," and then concludes with a final apology and benediction (Thomas, *The Book of Governors*, 5.17 (Budge, *The Book of Governors*, 1: 324)). What appears in extant manuscripts as Book 6 suddenly jumps to stories unrelated to Beth Abhe, focusing on the figure of Mar Gabriel. Gabriel only appeared briefly in the first five books when in Book 4 Thomas speaks of having written an earlier life of Mar Gabriel that also spoke of Amran bar Muhammad (Thomas, *The Book of Governors*, 4.21 (Budge, *The Book of Governors*, 1: 239)). Fiey, "Thomas of Marga", 364-365, and Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 213-214, arrive at a similar conclusion.

⁵¹ Thomas, *The Book of Governors*, 6.16 (Budge, *The Book of Governors*, 1: 386).

‘for behold, their holy ones see and know hidden things.’⁵² Soon afterwards Amran arrives at Beth Abhe, falls prostrate before Mar Gabriel and asks Gabriel to pray for him. Gabriel replies, “If you establish a covenant before me (and) before God that you will not kill Christians, I will reveal to you what you will become and what will happen to your children and your grandchildren.”⁵³ After Amran agrees that he and his descendants will protect Christians, especially monks and clergy, Gabriel informs him that he will peacefully inherit all Margā. The narrative ends with Thomas assuring his audience that Amran fulfilled his promises and commanded his sons to do so as well.⁵⁴ A few chapters later, Thomas tells us that, following his inheritance of Margā, Amran continues to be beneficent. Thomas then relates the story that one spring Amran sent a servant to Beth Abhe to buy provisions at twice the normal price. Gabriel tells the servant to take all the monastery’s grain to Amran. The servant, however, leaves some behind so that the monks will have something to eat. When the “harsh” Amran hears of his servant’s actions he angrily sends his servant back to retrieve the last of the grain, assuring him that “Rabban Gabriel will not lack anything.”⁵⁵ When the servant returns to the monastery, he is amazed to find that the granary has miraculously refilled. The servant then takes all the grain back to Amran who also is awed by Gabriel’s power.⁵⁶

Although these narratives are ostensibly about Amran son of Muhamad, it soon becomes apparent that Amran is a bit player in this drama. Despite Amran’s worldly influence, Thomas introduces him as a “servant” pacified by the “ruler” Gabriel. This subservience to Gabriel becomes literalized when, like a vassal, Amran falls prostrate before the abbot who grants him blessings in return for his family’s continued support. The second story extends this theme of dependence when, due to a food shortage, Amran needs the monastery’s grain enough to offer double market value. This tale also continues the motif of servanthood as Amran’s servant becomes a proxy for Amran himself. In both stories, these characters primarily serve as witnesses to the supremacy of the Christian holy man

⁵² *Ibid.* (*Ibid.*, 1: 387).

⁵³ *Ibid.* (*Ibid.*, 1: 388).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* (*Ibid.*, 1: 388).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 6.17 (*Ibid.*, 1: 401).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* (*Ibid.*, 1: 401).

as illustrated by their confessions of the holy one's powers and by the narrative's repeated use of the terms "amazed", "stupefied" and "wonder."

Compare these stories with those Thomas later composed about the same Amran son of Muhammad. The Book 4 version, a series of encounters between Amran and Mar Cyriacus, begins, "Then there was a certain troublesome Ishmaelite whose name was Amran bar Muhammad whom I also wrote about in the history of Rabban Gabriel—a cruel and powerful man, merciless and a murderer."⁵⁷ In this account, Amran seizes numerous fields, kills their owners, captures village after village and desires to murder Mar Cyriacus so that he can take possession of Beth Abhe. In response to Amran's attempt to coerce the monks into signing away Beth Abhe, Cyriacus rebukes Amran, telling him that the monastery will never be his, that he will die an untimely death and that the earth will three times refuse his dead body. Amran, shamed by Cyriacus's words, departs and begins to plan Cyriacus's demise. God thwarts Amran's initial plot when He teleports Cyriacus from Beth Abhe directly into Amran's audience chamber. Understandably, Amran is "stupefied and amazed" by this turn of events and he promises that he will no longer trouble the monks. Amran's shock does not last long, however, and immediately after Cyriacus's departure, Amran sends five men to ambush and kill Cyriacus. God again intervenes and fire springing from Cyriacus's fingertips foils the attempt on his life. At this point, Amran finally learns his lesson and he no longer harasses the monks of Beth Abhe. The narrative concludes with Amran's death and, in accord with Cyriacus's prediction, the earth three times casting out Amran's corpse.⁵⁸

It becomes difficult to reconcile these two story cycles. Amran cannot peacefully inherit Margā and constantly kill its landowners; he cannot keep his promise to respect the clergy and try to assassinate the abbot of Beth Abhe. Although Thomas wrote both story cycles and even has the more recent version allude to the prior one, he did not feel obliged to have his later characterization of Amran correspond with his earlier portrayal. These opposing accounts remind us that Thomas's writings are more concerned with literary tropes than with narrative consistency. The two depictions of Amran, one antagonistic the other conciliatory, also parallel the extremes to which Thomas's stories about Muslims tend.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 4.21 (*Ibid.*, 1: 239).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 4.21-22 (*Ibid.*, 1: 239-244).

As in the adverse encounters between Amran and Mar Cyriacus, several Muslim characters in *The Book of Governors* are clearly hostile to Christians. For example, Yala, son of Himran, “a most evil Arab man who surpassed all those in his time and after him in his harshness and robbery,”⁵⁹ destroys three monasteries and murders Mar Shubhhal-Maran. In response, the holy Mar Narsai curses Yala, proclaiming that the governor will soon kill him. A few sentences later Thomas informs us that this is exactly what happened.⁶⁰ The brevity of the account corresponds with the sparse motivation for Yala bar Himran’s actions. A slightly longer, albeit less bloody, conflict occurs immediately after the death of Mar Aha, the metropolitan of Abiabene. Taking advantage of the temporary vacancy in ecclesiastical leadership, Muslims confiscate a grain mill previously owned by the metropolitan. This leads to a confrontation with Mar Aha’s successor Mar Maran-Ammeh. Initially unable to resolve the dispute with the Muslims, Maran-Ammeh suggests that they all go to the mill and ask the millstone to whom it belongs. When they arrive at the mill, Maran-Ammeh prays aloud: “Oh unfeeling stone, by the great and supreme power of the word of the Lord that rules the height and the depth, if you belong to these Arabs grind flour as is your custom. But, if otherwise, and you are not theirs but the inheritance of this country’s metropolitan, may your grindings be changed into ash.”⁶¹ The results of this prayer “astounded” the Muslims, put them to shame, and quickly cleared up any question of ownership.⁶²

Each of these accounts follows the general plot structure of Amran’s conflict with Mar Cyriacus. A Muslim, typically characterized as “harsh” and frequently as “evil”, enters. Usually motivated by possible monetary gains, the Muslim initially harasses (or in Yala bar-Himran’s case kills) monks. The miraculous deeds of the Christian holy man, most often through amazing and shaming the Arabs, cause them to desist and quickly to leave the scene. Thomas, however, also describes a number of more benevolent Muslim characters whose relationship to Christians is much closer to that of Thomas’s earlier description of the peaceful encounters of Amran and Mar Gabriel. The longest of these stories is a three-chapter account relating Mar Cyriacus’s first encounter with a Muslim, in this

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 5.16 (*Ibid.*, 1: 314).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 5.16 (*Ibid.*, 1: 314-315).

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 3.4 (*Ibid.*, 1: 154).

⁶² *Ibid.* (*Ibid.*, 1: 155).

case his interactions with an unnamed Muslim from Mosul. Like most of Thomas's stories containing Muslim characters, this anecdote is primarily concerned with economics.

By the end of Book 4 Chapter 17 Beth Abhe has fallen on hard times. A locust infestation has destroyed most of the monastery's harvest forcing its newly appointed abbot, Mar Cyriacus, to borrow money from local merchants. No one knows how Mar Cyriacus will be able to pay off this debt.⁶³ Fortunately, chapter 18 opens with a philanthropically minded Muslim arriving on the scene. This *ṭayyāyā* is the ideal candidate to bail out Beth Abhe: the Muslim has made previous donations to monasteries, he is "very rich" and, best of all, his only son is suffering from a fatal illness. Thomas wastes no time. By the chapter's fourth sentence the Muslim has a vision telling him to summon a monk from Beth Abhe to heal his son. The Muslim meets with the bishop of Nineveh who quickly determines that the envisioned monk must be Mar Cyriacus. The bishop relates the story to Cyriacus asking him to provide a secondary relic. Cyriacus runs water over the cross he wears and sends the resulting holy water to the Muslim. His son drinks it and is instantly healed. The chapter ends with Cyriacus's notoriety on the rise as this incident is retold throughout Mosul. But, while famous, Cyriacus is still broke.⁶⁴

Although even a mildly perceptive reader could predict what would happen next, Thomas breaks up the heretofore hectic narrative and begins Chapter 19 not with the story's resolution but with some scriptural exegesis. Thomas previously characterized the wealthy man's faith as "close to that of ours."⁶⁵ Thomas now cites his actions as fulfilling Zechariah 8:22: "and many people and mighty nations will come to beseech the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem."⁶⁶ That is, just as in the prophecy of Zachariah, gentiles, although not Jewish, will eventually glorify God at the Jerusalem temple, so too this *ṭayyāyā*, although not Christian, supports Christian monasteries. Having found proper scriptural precedent, Thomas returns to his story. Cyriacus is introduced to the Arab who recognizes him from his former vision. He immediately pays Cyriacus's debt of 8000 zuze and, for good measure, donates an additional 2000 zuze to Beth Abhe. The

⁶³ *Ibid.* 4.17 (*Ibid.*, 1: 221-222).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 4.18 (*Ibid.*, 1: 222-223).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* (*Ibid.*, 1: 222).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 4.19 (*Ibid.*, 1: 223).

narrative ends with the monks, appropriately enough, rejoicing. As for the anonymous Muslim, we never hear from him again.⁶⁷

The Book of Governors relates several other friendly interactions between Muslims and Christians. For example, the Muslim fisherman Hashim recounts that one evening he and his father saw Mar Narsai literally walking on water. Narsai, not wanting the story of his miracle to spread, sent his disciple to the Muslims requesting that while Narsai was alive they would not reveal what they saw to anyone. The fishermen agree and the disciple instructs them always to utter Narsai's name prior to casting their nets. Hashim finishes his story by stating, "And from that time forward, whenever we mention the name of that holy man, with a bountiful hand we take a haul (of fish) from the Tigris."⁶⁸ A more public display of power occurs when Mar Elijah is asked to exorcize a Muslim woman possessed by demons. In a scene similar to the synoptic gospels' accounts of the demoniac of Gerasenes, Mar Elijah expels the demons from the woman and instructs them to flee to the pagan-dominated city of Harran. Those present hear the demons repeatedly cry out in Arabic, "Ho, let us go to Harran, Ho, let us go to Haran," as their voices slowly fade into the distance. The story ends with the woman proclaiming, "There is not faith or truth except among the holy Christian people."⁶⁹ Other Muslim characters such as the "crowd upon crowd" of Muslims who come to be blessed by Mar Cyriacus are also favorably inclined toward Christian holy men.⁷⁰

At first glance, these Muslim admirers of Christian saints seem quite distinct from rulers and bandits who try to steal from and murder abbots. Yet even if not depicted as "harsh," these beneficent Muslims play exactly the same narrative role as their more evil counterparts do. In *The Book of Governors* the primary function of Muslims is to provide Christian holy men with both an opportunity and an audience for their miraculous deeds. As a result, modern readers might consider Muslim characters in *The Book of Governors* as superficially developed and interchangeable with each other. It is, however, the very stock and stereotypical nature of these figures that allows us to examine them more easily as a group and to investigate how their general characterization may reflect Thomas's view of contemporary Muslims.

⁶⁷ (*Ibid.*, 1: 224-225).

⁶⁸ 5.16 (*Ibid.*, 1:316).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 5.11 (*Ibid.*, 1:287-289).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 4.24 (*Ibid.*, 1:248).

One hint of Thomas's attitudes toward Muslims comes from the scribe who eventually added Thomas's earlier work to books 1 through 5 of *The Book of Governors* without harmonizing Thomas's stories about Amran son of Muhammad. Whether by design or by accident, the eventual inclusion of these very different depictions of the same Muslim character reflects a more general trope regarding Muslims found throughout Thomas's work. In *The Book of Governors* Muslims appear as inherently unpredictable. As in the dead-dog story Arabs suddenly arrive, without clear cause or motivation; they may be friends or foes or quickly shift from one of these categories to another. A recurrent role of the Christian holy man is to deal with Muslims' erratic behavior, pacifying hostile Muslims and eliciting support from those more sympathetic to Christianity.

It is not difficult to correlate this image of the unpredictable Muslim with Thomas's historical context. Thomas became a monk at Beth Abhe in 832 CE.⁷¹ The previous decades had been a period of great growth for East Syrian Christianity. Under the Catholicos and Beth Abhe alumnus Timothy I (r. 780-823), the Church of the East launched an ambitious missionary effort eastward substantially expanding its dioceses and membership. In Baghdad, Timothy I frequented the Abbasid court, was personally commissioned by the caliph al-Mahdi to translate Aristotle's *Topics*, and participated in public interreligious disputations.⁷² By the time Thomas composed *The Book of Governors*, however, this situation had drastically changed. *The Book of Governors* was written either during, or soon after, the reign of al-Mutawakkil (r. 847-861), whose caliphate Griffith characterizes as "by all accounts.... a turning point in the history of the relationship between Christian and Muslim intellectuals in Iraq."⁷³

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 1.4 (*Ibid.*, 1:125).

⁷² For a more detailed discussion of Timothy I's expansion of the Church of the East and his dealings with Abbasid rulers, see Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, *Die apostolische Kirche des Ostens: Geschichte der sogenannten Nestorianer* (Klagenfurt: Verlag Kitab, 2000), 57-59; Sebastian Brock, "Two Letters of the Patriarch Timothy from the Late Eighth Century on Translations from Greek," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 9 (1999), 233-246; Hanna P. Cheikho, *Dialectique du langage sur Dieu: lettre de Timothée I (728-823) à Serge* (Rome: 1983), 15-26; Jean Maurice Fiey, *Chrétiens Syriques sous les Abbassides surtout à Bagdad (749-1252)*, CSCO vol. 420 (Subsidia 59) (Louvain: 1980), 36-65; Hans Putman, *L'Église et L'Islam sous Timothée (780-823): Étude sur l'église nestorienne au temps des premiers Abbassides avec nouvelle édition et traduction du dialogue entre Timothée al-Mahdi* (Beruit: Dar el-Machreq, 1975), 127-147; Young, *Patriarch, Shaw, and Caliph*, 129-155.

⁷³ Griffith, "The Apologetic Treatise of Nonnus of Nisibis," 115. As pointed out by

Although under al-Mutawakkil Christian involvement in the translation movement continued and the caliph even had a Christian chief physician,⁷⁴ al-Mutawakkil ended the tradition of open religious debates, enacted a series of anti-Christian measures and imprisoned a number of Christian leaders, including the metropolitan of Beth Garmai and Thomas's own Catholicos Theodosius (r. 853-858).⁷⁵ Given these circumstances, the surprise is not that Muslims appear as hostile forces in *The Book of Governors* but that they do so only occasionally.

Thomas's willingness, especially under such circumstances, to present positive as well as negative Muslim characters contrasts greatly with what one finds in the writings of his western contemporaries. Thomas's stereotype of the unpredictable Muslim remains a far cry from the rhetoric of ninth-century Greek and Latin authors such as Theophanes's proclamation that Muhammad is the forerunner of the Antichrist, Nicetas of Byzantium's depiction of Muslim beliefs as demon-inspired and barbarous, or Ermold the Black's "detestable Muslims" who likewise follow the commandments of demons.⁷⁶ Among Syriac authors, Thomas's portrayal of Muslims is not without precedent. Nevertheless, it diverges from many of the more uniformly hostile depictions found among the earliest Syriac writings on Islam such as *The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* where the Sons of Ishmael are "barbarian tyrants (who) are not men but 'sons of

Fiey, "Thomas of Marga," 362-364, Thomas must have written *The Book of Governors* after 850 as he alludes to the death of the Catholicos Abraham II (d. 850). Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 215 argues "the fact that he remembers himself as a youth when he worked for the catholicos in the 840s suggests that he is writing considerably later, probably about the 860s."

⁷⁴ For a discussion of the physician Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq and his role in the translation movement see Griffith, *In the Shadow of the Mosque*, 119-122.

⁷⁵ For a discussion of the changes brought about by al-Mutawakkil's anti-Christian policies see Milka Levy-Rubin, "Shurūt 'Umar and its Alternatives: The Legal Debate on the Status of the Dhimmīs," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 30 (2005), 204; Mun'im Sirry, "Early Muslim-Christian Dialogue: A Closer Look at Major Themes of the Theological Encounter," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 16 (2005), 366-367; Mark R. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 63; Griffith, "The Apologetic Treatise of Nonnus of Nisibis", 115-118; Fiey, *Chrétiens Syriaques sous les Abbassides*, 83-105.

⁷⁶ Theophanes, *Chronographia* (Carolus de Boor, *Theophanis chronographia*, vol. 1 (Leipzig: G. Olms, 1883), 417); Nicetas of Byzantium (*PG*, 105: 729, 709); Ermold the Black, *Poem on Louis the Pious*, 1: 287-298 (Benjamin Z. Kedar, *Crusade and Mission: European Approaches toward the Muslims* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 216).

desolation,” or *The Apocalypse of John the Little* where the Sons of Hagar “afflict all those who confess our Lord Jesus because they hate the Lord’s name.”⁷⁷ *The Book of Governors* thus presents an important data point that helps document a more general trend among later Syriac writings which become increasingly accommodating, or at least realpolitik, in their views of Muslims.⁷⁸

This attitude of realpolitik may also account for how infrequently explicit discussions of religious difference appear in *The Book of Governors*. Besides once characterizing *ṭayyāyē* as monotheists, Thomas makes no mention of specific Muslim beliefs and practices, no references to Muhammad, no allusions to the Qur’an. Thomas’s preference for the term *ṭayyāyā* may further obscure religious affiliation and most of his stories could be retold without speaking about the characters’ religion. It is possible, of course, that he found it politically expedient to be circumspect in his discussion of Islam, a motive scholars attribute to the occurrence of the term “pagan” instead of Muslim in the prison writings of Thomas’s Miaphysite contemporary Nonnus of Nisibis.⁷⁹ The probability, however, of a Muslim having both the occasion and the desire to read a 200-page Syriac monastic history seems fairly remote. Nor would it be difficult for a Muslim reader to guess what religion a character named Amran bar Muhammad most likely followed. Instead, I suspect that the paucity of Thomas’s references to religious differences between Muslims and Christians is a result of his agenda for this specific work.⁸⁰ In writing *The Book*

⁷⁷ *The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, 11: 17 (CSCO 540: 31-32); *The Apocalypse of John the Little* (J. Rendel Harris, *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles together with the Apocalypses of Each One of Them* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1900), 20*).

⁷⁸ Similarly, other later works such as the writings of Timothy I, *The Life of John of Dailam*, and *The Life of Gabriel of Qarmim* speak of Muslims much more positively than seventh- and early eighth-century Syriac documents such as *The Chronicle of Khuzistan*, John bar Penkaye’s *Book of Main Points*, *The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Ephrem*, *The Edessene Apocalypse*, *The Anti-Life of Maximus the Confessor* and *The Chronicle of Disasters*. There are exceptions to this trend as one can find some later Syriac depictions of Muslims that are quite negative (e.g., *The Bahira Legend*). Nevertheless, the contrast between *The Book of Governors* and the earliest strata of Syriac writings about Islam remains striking.

⁷⁹ For example, Griffith, “The Apologetic Treatise of Nonnus of Nisibis”, 120, 136.

⁸⁰ It is important to keep in mind Thomas Glick’s observation: “While a single text may represent a highly focused projection of ethnocentrism, as in the standard religious polemics of medieval times, that does not mean that the author was thereby displaying all of his personality” (Thomas F. Glick, “My Master, the Jew: Observations on Interfaith Scholarly Interaction in the Middle Ages,” in *Jews, Muslims and Christians in and Around*

of *Governors* Thomas did not choose to compose a systematic theological tractate or an anti-Muslim disputation. In a text centered on a provincial monastery it makes perfect sense that Muslims have become only bit players, mainly found in stories concerning the monastery's financial situation. Issues such as whether a Muslim entourage blames the monks of Beth Abhe for killing a favorite hunting dog have greater immediacy than a more overt interreligious dialogue.

This does not mean, however, that *The Book of Governors* is free of polemic. In *The Book of Governors* Christians never convert to Islam and even the Muslim demoniac who proclaims that Christian beliefs alone are true is never baptized. Nonetheless, by deemphasizing the distance between Christianity and Islam to the point that a rich Muslim's faith can "be close to ours," the narrative world of *The Book of Governors* allows characters to express a religious preference and, according to Thomas, that preference is always for Christianity. In *The Book of Governors* Christian villagers do not seek blessings and healings from Muslim holy men, nor do Christians donate money to mosques, nor are Christian notables overawed by the power of Islamic religious authorities. Similarly, episodes such as using water that had been made holy by Mar Cyriacus's cross to heal a Muslim's only son take on a particular poignancy when one considers the prevalence of contemporary Muslim critiques of the veneration of relics and of the cross.⁸¹ Depictions of Muslims, such as the temperamental dog owner, as erratic and occasionally incompetent can be seen as a form of literary revenge. Anecdotes in which Christians, in one way or another, achieve minor triumphs over Muslims could thus serve as an outlet for safely expressing frustration at no longer holding substantial political power.

Descriptions of beneficent as well as hostile Muslims, the overall impression of Muslims' unpredictability, the mitigation of religious difference, the implicit religious polemic, all make *The Book of Governors* an important moment in the history of Christian representations of Muslims.

the Crown of Aragon, Harvey J. Hames, ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 157). Without other extant writings it remains impossible to determine if, when writing in a different literary context, Thomas would have depicted Muslims differently.

⁸¹ For example, *The Disputation between a Monk of Bêt Hâlê and a Muslim Notable* (cited in Griffith, "The Monk of Bêt Hâlê and a Muslim Emir"); Theodore bar Koni, *Scholion*, 10 (CSCO 69: 268-272). Also see Sidney H. Griffith, "Images, Islam and Christian Icons," in *La Syrie de Byzance à l'Islam*, Jean-Paul Rey-Coquais and Pierre Caniver, eds (Damas: Institut Français de Damas, 1992), 125-131.

Of course the way in which an author depicts a set of literary characters does not necessarily correspond with how she or he feels about their real-life equivalents. Muslims, however, play a very small role in *The Book of Governors*; Thomas did not have to include any of the dozen or so anecdotes about Muslims that appear in his work and he had few constraints concerning how he portrayed these minor characters. This suggests that the characterization of Muslims found in Thomas's writing reflects, at least in part, the attitude of the mid-ninth-century bishop of Margā who, similar to many of the holy men in *The Book of Governors*, came into periodic contact with Muslims as he tried to negotiate the successful continuation of his own religious community.

Narrative Assumptions

In addition to the stereotypical portrayal of the cruel Muslim and the amazing abbot, several other details in Thomas's dog story raise a critical reader's suspicions. For example, the tale's plot and dialogue are clearly modeled after Jesus' resurrection of Jairus's daughter found in the synoptic gospels.⁸² Then, of course, there is the issue of a dog twice dying, and once reviving. As a result, we cannot make instant leaps between what Thomas's story says and what is actually going on in medieval Margā. At the same time, we do know that Muslims indeed did occasionally visit monasteries. Other Syriac documents speak of Christian/Muslim encounters taking place at monasteries and several Muslim authors also refer to their monastic visits.⁸³ In other words, the carefully constructed narrative world of Thomas's book, with its numerous literary tropes, apologetics and polemics, can help us determine what ninth-century Syriac Christians considered to be plausible. Of course such assumptions were not always historically accurate. nevertheless, an examination of the presuppositions Thomas's audience needed to bring to *The Book of Governors*

⁸² Mk 5:22-23, 35-43; Mt 9:18-19, 22-26; Lk 8:41-42, 49-56. In particular note the similarities between "When he entered he said to them, why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping... little girl get up" (Mk 5:39-41, NRSV) and Thomas of Margā's, "And he said to that Arab, 'Your dog is not dead... I will wake your dog and he will go with you... Dead dog get up.'"

⁸³ For example, *The Disputation between a Monk of Beth Ḥālē and a Muslim Notable*. Also see Griffith, "The Monk of Bēt Ḥālē and a Muslim Emir," n68; Gerard Troupeau, "Les couvents chrétiens dans la littérature Arabe," *La Nouvelle Revue du Caire*, 1 (1975): 265-279.

in order for its plot to make sense thus provides information that, when used judiciously, can help us better understand early Christian/Muslim interactions.

Often the most useful data is most peripheral to Thomas's agenda. For example, Thomas claims to have heard from a priest named Nekhwar the following story. One year Rabban George went to Mosul to negotiate taxes. He stopped by the house of a Miaphysite Christian named Uthman, son of Khusrau, in order to elicit Uthman's help in the negotiations. Given the long standing enmity between East Syrian and Miaphysite Christians, this encounter becomes even more surprising when George discovers his Miaphysite colleague reading a theological tractate written by the East Syrian Catholicos Isho'yahb III, formerly a monk at Beth Abhe. This leads Uthman to explain why he and his fellow Miaphysites respect Beth Abhe and its East Syrian alumni. According to Uthman, his bishop had spoken to him about another Miaphysite bishop who became friends with the former abbot of Beth Abhe, Mar Cyriacus. One day this ecumenical pair toured some local monasteries via a poorly planned itinerary requiring several river crossings. Mar Cyriacus, however, simply took the hand of his Miaphysite friend and they walked on water, substantially reducing the travel time.

Thomas notes that this account's Miaphysite provenance makes it especially trustworthy. In Thomas's words: "We know that the witness of enemies is more exact and trustworthy, for these ones have a habit of concealing and denying the veritable deeds performed by our holy men."⁸⁴ Despite such assurances from Margā's bishop, one could be forgiven for questioning the historical veracity of Thomas's narrative of Nekhwar's version of George's story of Uthman's recounting of his bishop's anecdote of another bishop's encounter with Mar Cyriacus. Given the account's convoluted chain of transmission, one also could be forgiven for forgetting what may be the most valuable part of this story's retelling—the initial frame of Mar George going to Mosul for tax negotiations.

This provides an example in which the overlap between narrative world and lived experience is easily confirmed by other sources. For example, dozens of tenth-century Syriac colophons describe the journeys of the abbot Moses of Nisibis who traveled from Egypt to Baghdad to successfully regain tax exemption for his home monastery.⁸⁵ Even without these

⁸⁴ Thomas, *The Book of Governors*, 4.25 (Budge, *The Book of Governors*, 1: 251).

⁸⁵ During these journeys the bibliophilic Moses acquired 250 Syriac manuscripts that

corroborating witnesses, the frame story's tangential nature would suggest that it presents a potentially useful piece of historical evidence. Thomas could have achieved his goal of a Miaphysite character confirming Mar Cyriacus's power through any number of plot devices. He chose the brief allusion to tax negotiation solely because it was expedient for his narrative; he never returns to this topic and taxes play no role in the larger story. This narrative expediency, however, relies on Thomas's audience considering the episode to be easily believable, as there is no reason why Thomas would choose an implausible detail to transition from one story to another. We will never know whether George himself actually went to Mosul to negotiate taxes or, if he did, whether he was as successful as Moses was in Baghdad. Nevertheless, the narrative logic of *The Book of Governors* suggests that its ninth-century readership was acquainted with monastic officials involved in tax negotiations. This makes Thomas's work a useful resource for reconstructing the economic interactions between medieval Christians and Muslims. It suggests that, contrary to many Christian claims, monasteries often had to pay taxes to their Muslim rulers and that the amount owed was subject to periodic negotiation.⁸⁶ A similar procedure for examining the narrative assumptions implicit in Thomas's anecdotes could nuance our understanding of issues such as Christian use of Hijra dating, Christian commercial dealings with Muslims, or a shift from Christian to Muslim tax collectors.⁸⁷

Just as the details found in Thomas's stories occasionally preserve traces of actual interactions, so too what Thomas does not record can increase our understanding of early Christian/Muslim relations. A significant topic where Thomas's silences are particularly telling pertains to the so-called Covenant of Umar. Modern discussions of Christians under Islamic rule often focus on a set of prescriptions whose authorship was eventually attributed to the mid-seventh-century caliph Umar. Because in its final

he brought back to Deir al-Surian. Many of these are now found in the British Library and form our earliest and most valuable collection of Syriac manuscripts. For an overview of Moses and his travels see Jules Leroy, "Moïse de Nisibe," in *Symposium Syriacum 1972* (Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1974), 457-470; Sebastian Brock, "Without Mushê of Nisibis, Where Would We Be?," *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 56 (2004), 15-24.

⁸⁶ For example, *The Life of John of Dailam* (Brock, "John of Dailam", 139-140); *The Life of Gabriel of Qartmin* (Palmer, *Monk and Mason*, LXXII).

⁸⁷ For example, Thomas, *The Book of Governors*, 2.40, 3.9, 3.40; 6.17; 3.3 (Budge, *The Book of Governors*, 1: 125, 167; 400; 152).

form this Covenant of Umar included a variety of restrictions upon Christian behavior, clothing and worship, the Covenant has become a frequent proof text in books such as *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam*, *Islamic Economics and the Final Jihad* and *How Islam Plans to Change the World*.⁸⁸ Among more scholarly communities both the relatively late date of Muslim documents that contain the Covenant of Umar as well as substantial variants in its content have led recent scholars to treat the Covenant not as a single document but as an evolving and contested set of covenant traditions; only in the mid-ninth century do these tradition become standardized and canonical.⁸⁹ Both popular and more scholarly discussions rarely ask, to what degree were the Covenant's regulations actually put into practice?⁹⁰ Written by a bishop who undoubtedly had regular contact with Muslims in the midst of what most see as the pivotal decades for the Covenant's consolidation, *The Book of Governors* has much to say (or more accurately, much not to say) about the Covenant of Umar's effect upon the daily lives of medieval Christians.⁹¹ Most versions of the Covenant

⁸⁸ Robert Spencer, *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam (and the Crusades)* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2005), 50; David J. Jonsson, *Islamic Economics and the Final Jihad: The Muslim Brotherhood to the Leftist/Marxist Islamist Alliance* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2006), 78-81; William Wagner, *How Islam Plans to Change the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004), 107-108. As just a few of many other such examples see David J. Jonsson, *The Clash of Ideologies: The Making of the Christian and Islamic Worlds* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2005), 526-529, Irshad Manji, *The Trouble with Islam: A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2003), 63-67; Bat Ye'or, *The Dhimmis: Jews and Christians under Islam* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1985), 48, 182-184.

⁸⁹ Particularly important in this regard is Levy-Rubin, "Shurūt 'Umar and its Alternatives," 170-206, esp. 172-174. See also, Griffith, *In the Shadow of the Mosque*, 15; Mark R. Cohen, "What was the Pact of 'Umar? A Literary-Historical Study," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 23 (1999), 100-157; Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross*, 57.

⁹⁰ An important exception is Robinson, *Empire and Elites*, 13, who states that "the Islamic conquest tradition frequently prohibits the striking of sounding-boards, but we know that monks and priests kept on striking," an argument he supports with a passage from *The Book of Governors*, albeit one that appears in a pre-conquest setting. Robinson also notes evidence of church building in the ninth and tenth centuries, although he does not here cite Thomas.

⁹¹ For example, Levy-Rubin, "Shurūt 'Umar and its Alternatives," 173, speaks of the ninth century as the culmination of competing covenant traditions. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross*, 63, discusses al-Mutawakkil's implementation of dress restrictions upon non-Muslims. Both Griffith, *In the Shadow of the Mosque*, 15, and Levy-Rubin, "Shurūt 'Umar and its Alternatives," 204, argue that the Covenant of Umar obtained its classical form under al-Mutawakkil.

include restrictions on Christians ringing sounding boards for assembly and prohibitions against the building or repair of Christian churches.⁹² *The Book of Governors* provides important data suggesting that, at least in mid-ninth-century Northern Mesopotamia, such regulations rarely were enforced. Thomas frequently speaks of sounding boards being rung. In one case a board is sounded to summon a mob of Christian ascetics to attack the greedy Catholicos Selibha-Zekha after he confiscated a gem-encrusted codex from Beth Abhe.⁹³ In a different episode, when a sacristan goes to sound the board for evening prayer he discovers that a particularly valuable collection of nut trees has suddenly appeared in the church's courtyard.⁹⁴ Another sacristan sounds the board for the morning prayer after which Mar Cyprian sends an angel to kill a group of insolent polytheists.⁹⁵ Monks also beat a sounding board to summon their brethren before an entourage that comes from the Muslim governor 'Umran bar Muhammed, hardly a way to impress the governor if such an activity were considered to be illegal.⁹⁶ Several of Thomas's narratives also briefly refer to church construction. Villagers near Ninevah build an expensive new church, as does a group of former Magians, and later Mar Aha.⁹⁷ Less successful is a recent Magian convert who builds a new monastery which never is consecrated because the local clergy know of the patron's arrogance and pride.⁹⁸ Of particular import for Thomas is the Catholicos Isho'yahb III's plan to fund a thorough renovation and expansion of Beth Abhe which attracts the notice of the governor of Mosul. The governor in no way prohibits this new construction, but he does use it as an excuse to raise taxes.⁹⁹ As in the example of Mar George's journey to Mosul, what

⁹² Various covenant traditions place different restrictions on these activities. For example, as pointed out by Levy-Rubin, "Shurūt 'Umar and its Alternatives", 176-177, and Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross*, 60, the least restrictive versions of the Covenant of 'Umar banned church constructions only in Muslim dominated cities and specified that sounding boards should not be loudly sounded outside of a church. As noted by Levy-Rubin, "Shurūt 'Umar and its Alternatives", 201, 204, more stringent regulations, especially those in what becomes the dominant Covenant of Umar tradition, no longer make distinctions between Muslim- and Christian-dominated areas.

⁹³ Thomas, *The Book of Governors*, 2.27 (Budge, *The Book of Governors*, 1: 103).

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 2.32 (*Ibid.*, 1: 111).

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 6.17 (*Ibid.*, 1: 398).

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 4.21 (*Ibid.*, 1: 241).

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 2.30, 2.32, 2.39 (*Ibid.*, 1: 107, 110, 124).

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 2.43 (*Ibid.*, 1: 136).

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 4.9-10 (*Ibid.*, 1: 206-207).

makes these references particularly valuable is the scarcity of detail.¹⁰⁰ Most often these allusions are simply background for the main story. Thomas never presents a sounding board or church construction as unusual, he is never apologetic about these practices, nothing links them to his larger agenda and there is no indication that either Thomas or his audience considered them illicit. Other intriguing absences in *The Book of Governors* that deserve further analysis include any discussion of sartorial regulations, any narratives of Muslims converting to Christianity and Muslims only appearing in the accounts Thomas sets in the Abbasid period.

In his discussion of Syriac and Christian Arabic disputation texts, Griffith writes: "Their undoubtedly fictional narrative, to be successful, would nevertheless seem to have required at least that measure of verisimilitude provided by the evocation of a recognizable social behavior of their own time and place."¹⁰¹ Applying a similar heuristic to texts such as Thomas's *The Book of Governors* suggests that these works may provide a valuable source of information regarding commonly acknowledged social practices. Although one must never forget the biases of author and circumstance, when carefully analyzed and compared with other materials, even the most miracle-filled of stories may provide insight not only into their author's attitudes but also into the world that author and audience shared.

History and Hagiography

Even the brief analysis of a small selection of Thomas's anecdotes shows that *The Book of Governors* is too complex simply to take at face value and too valuable simply to disregard. In the extended case of Thomas's discussions of Muslims, an analysis of narrative elements such as vocabulary and characterization reveals much about Thomas's worldview. The identification of some of the narrative's assumptions suggests that, on issues ranging from specific tax policies to Muslim regulation of Christian worship, the suppositions behind Thomas's stories can provide information about the context in which he wrote. Even more important than any specific

¹⁰⁰ Other examples of church construction in *The Book of Governors* include Thomas, *The Book of Governors*, 6.3, 6.4-6.5, 6.12, 6.13, 6.15 (Budge, *The Book of Governors*, 1: 337, 341-342, 371, 372-374, 381-383).

¹⁰¹ Griffith, *In the Shadow of the Mosque*, 103.

detail gleaned from *The Book of Governors*, however, is the broader methodological lesson to be learned from this work's marginal status in modern scholarship.

When Budge published his edition and translation of *The Book of Governors* in 1893 he subtitled the work, "*The Historia Monastica* of Thomas Bishop of Margâ A.D. 840." For many, the miracle-filled *Book of Governors* fails to meet our expectations for a firmly dated, officially authored history. The problem, however, lies not with Budge's title, which took its cue from the manuscript's opening.¹⁰² Nor should we blame the scribe who composed the incipit. Nor does fault lie with Thomas himself. Rather, *The Book of Governors* serves as a powerful indictment of our system of genre classification. In her article "Beyond Positivism and Genre", Felice Lifshitz notes that among medievalists there has been "something of an industry involved specifically in discovering the characteristics which distinguish historical writing, or 'historiography' from 'hagiography'" even though the early Middle Ages "lacked any conception of 'historiography' that even *could* be distinguished from 'hagiography.'" ¹⁰³ In suggesting that *The Book of Governors* can help document early Christian views of Islam and can, in certain cases, help us reconstruct some of the rough contours of early Christian/Muslim interactions my point is not to reclaim Budge's subtitle and establish *The Book of Governors* as a *bona fide* example of objective history. Nor, in emphasizing the agenda behind Thomas's accounts, do I aim to categorize the work as a collection of ahistoric tales of saints. Instead, like Lifshitz, I want to argue that the very categories of history and hagiography hinder rather than help analysis.

In terms of Syriac sources concerning Islam, classifying certain works as historiographic often obscures the strong ideological motives that shaped their composition and affected their content. For example, many modern writers take the statement of the mid-ninth-century chronicler Dionysius of Tel Maḥre that Syriac Christians welcomed Muslim rule as an objective description of seventh-century attitudes, or uncritically accept *The Chronicle of Zuqnin's* claim that Yazid II tried to execute all his

¹⁰² Thomas, *The Book of Governors*, Introduction (Budge, *The Book of Governors*, 1: 3). Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that for his subtitle Budge only uses the term "history" to speak of Thomas's writings, while the incipit speaks of Thomas's "history and stories" (*tash'itā w'sharbē*) concerning Beth Abhe and its monks.

¹⁰³ Felice Lifshitz, "Beyond Positivism and Genre: 'Hagiographical' Texts as Historical Narrative," *Viator* 25 (1994), 95, 98. Lifshitz's emphasis.

blue-eyed subjects.¹⁰⁴ In failing to recognize that what we traditionally label historiography is “as ‘literary’, as ‘moralizing’, and as much a rhetorical art form” as what we label hagiography,¹⁰⁵ we risk naïvely accepting these documents’ truth claims as accurate descriptions of Christian/Muslim interactions.¹⁰⁶ Relegating other texts to the often derogatory realm of hagiography results in works with numerous references to Muslims such as *The Book of Governors*, *The Life of Theodūtē*, *The Qenneshre Fragment*, *The History of the Convent of Sabrisho*, *The Life of Gabriel of Qartmin*, *The Life of Rabban Hormitz*, *The Life of John of Dailam* and *The Book of Chastity* almost never appearing in scholarship on Christian views of Islam.¹⁰⁷ Medieval authors made no such distinctions. For example, similar versions of the Miaphysite monastery of Qenneshre suffering from an infestation of demons appear in *The Chronicle of Michael the Syrian*, *The Chronicle of 1234* and *The Qenneshre Fragment*.¹⁰⁸ Although modern scholars usually categorize the two chronicles as historiographic and *The Qenneshre Fragment* as hagiographic, the chronicles’ versions of this episode are no less miracle-filled than that in *The Qenneshre Fragment*. There is no justification for analyzing these accounts differently simply because of how we categorize the works in which they appear. Scholars need to be aware of the biases of all medieval sources, not just those we choose to call

¹⁰⁴ *The Chronicle of Michael the Syrian* 11: 3 (Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*, 4: 410); *The Chronicle of 1234* (CSCO 81: 237). *The Chronicle of Zuqnin* (CSCO 104: 164).

¹⁰⁵ Lifshitz, “Beyond Positivism and Genre”, 100.

¹⁰⁶ In recent years some scholars have become more critical in their analysis of Syriac chronicles and increasingly attentive to the chroniclers’ agendas. For example, see the remarks of Palmer, *West-Syrian Chronicles*, xxviii-xxix and Jan J. van Ginkel, “Making History: Michael the Syrian and His Sixth-Century Sources”, in *Symposium Syriacum VII*, ed. René Lavenant, Orientalia Christiana Analecta (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1998), 351-358.

¹⁰⁷ *The Life of Theodūtē* remains unpublished but is discussed in Palmer, “Amid in the Seventh Century”, 111-138. *The Qenneshre Fragment*: Nau, “Notice historique sur le monastère de Qaramin”, 124-135. *The History of the Convent of Sabrisho*: Mingana, *Sources Syriacques I*, 171-220. *The Life of Gabriel of Qartmin*: Palmer, *Monk and Mason*, 55-92. *The Life of Rabban Hormitz*: E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Histories of Rabban Hormizd the Persian and Rabban Bar-Idta*, v. 1 (London: 1902). *The Life of John of Dailam*: Brock, “John of Dailam”, 125-143. *The Book of Chastity*: J.B. Chabot, *Le livre de la chasteté composé par Jésusdenah, évêque de Baṣrah*, Extrait des mélanges d’archéologie et d’histoire, vol. 16 (Rome: 1896).

¹⁰⁸ *The Chronicle of Michael the Syrian*, 11: 8-9 (Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*, 4: 420-421, 429); *The Chronicle of 1234* (CSCO 81: 267-268); *The Qenneshre Fragment* (Nau, “Notice historique sur le monastère de Qaramin”, 124-135).

hagiographic. So too, the medieval historian should examine all extant accounts, not just those found in texts we choose to call historiographic. Distancing ourselves from the problematic axis of historiography versus hagiography enriches our methodology, expands our data set and helps us to better understand a wide range of medieval phenomena including the earliest strata of Christian/Muslim encounters.

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